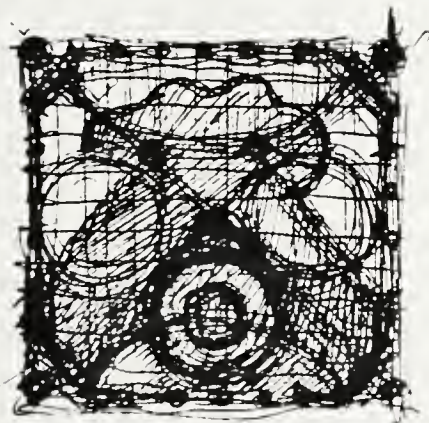
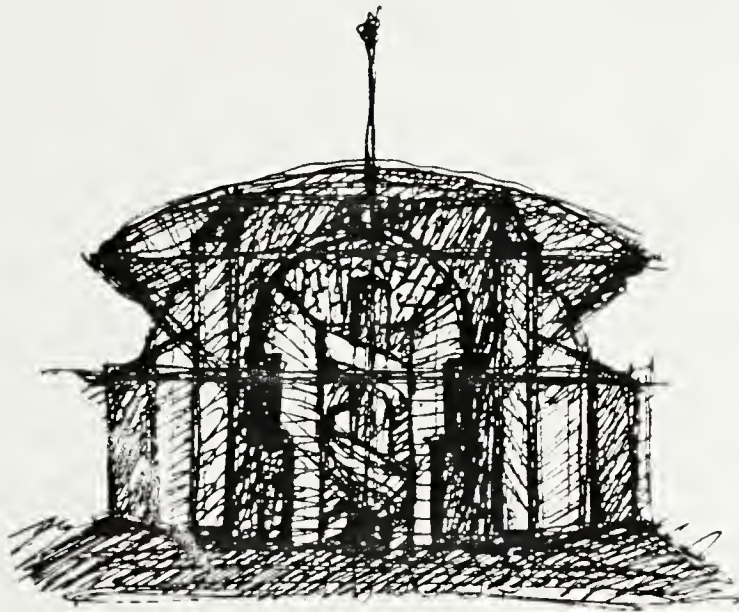


ARCHITECTURE and CONSCIOUSNESS



DAN COMA MAY 19 — JUNE 10

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DAN COMA was born in a land between Orient and Occident - Transylvania, Romania. Raised in a medieval town, his first revelation of architecture was the exalting spirit of light and shadow flowing through the sinuous streets, where Orient of the trees and Occident of the Gothic Cathedrals rose from their common ground in a mutual search for the sky. These were his true teachers, who revealed the complexity of the world, and their quest for the unison.

Today, through projects and drawings with critical essays, DAN COMA is searching for fundamental answers in architecture, where Modernity and Eternity live together.

This exhibition will present architecture as a noble aspiration, architecture as a spiritual flight, architecture as redemption.

DAN COMA is the first of a series of architects who will present exhibitions at STOREFRONT

S T O R E F R O N T
FOR ART AND ARCHITECTURE 51 PRINCE ST. NYC. 10012. 431-5795

First look at his scheme for an urban detached house. This is not a happy project. Dan Coma calls it "agonizing," describing it as "a pathological outcry for help of a rare extinguishing animal." The site, more like a battleground than a dwelling ground, is surrounded by barbed wire and charred tree stumps which record the greenery a city displaces. Heavy, unornamented arches erupt from the ground without ever attaching themselves to the house they surround, as if to say: Look, even this most exquisite architectural form cannot connect. A watch tower dominates the house itself; inside are three bedrooms, one per floor, connected by a stairwell - spine shut off so that the inhabitants need never speak. The living room is, Coma explains, "an unquiet form thus expressing the dynamics of human contacts at the family level"; its walls jerk and angles pointlessly around. "In the field of contradiction": This is an isolated dwelling in a communal environment, a suburban house in an urban sphere; this is a building which cannot connect.

Dan Coma's "Machine for Thinking" could stand, I believe, as a symbol for his perception about modern life: unconnected to nature, isolating, solitary, violent, frightened, and cheap. Like most architects today Coma's work is propelled in part by a recognition that the modernist agenda has failed. Its idolatry of the intellect spawned an architecture of the machine which did not create the expected utopia of social equity. But Coma's vision of how to reinsert purpose into architecture differs vastly from the American Post-Modernists who share his disillusionment. While they pillage the Occidental tradition for guidance, arriving at solutions as varied as neoclassicism, vernacular regionalism (sometimes "critical," sometimes not) and pop iconology, Coma feels alienated and victimized by western culture. He looks to the Orient and posits a more spiritual, an almost holistic existence--Dan Coma wants to reinsert architecture with the passionate, the transcendental, and the mystical.

What plagues this man? Perhaps it is the stunning incongruity of his native Rumanian village's small, old buildings, irregularly arranged, with New York's hyper-rational geometric grid. Yet perhaps the conflict lies deeper in Coma, for he describes Rumania itself as a country plagued with "an Oriental consciousness by Occidental aspirations." In any case he wishes to unite these two worlds, fusing all that they symbolize. He professes a nostalgia for the premodern world, in which (I put the words of Mircea Eliade in Coma's mouth) "men were less aware of belonging to the human species than of a kind of cosmic-biologic participation in the life of their landscape." (1) Like Louis Kahn, Coma thinks architecture "must start with the archaic first." (2)

Yet Both the content and the presentation of Coma's work suggests an ambivalence in his devotion to joining modern and premodern, intellect and passion. For while his Skyscraper and the House of Death and Life

achieve a symbolic fusion of Occident and Orient, in other projects those forces remain independent and opposed. And all too often Coma's presentation, an unwieldy juggling act of words and images, subverts the power of his message.

Coma's Skyscraper and his House of Death and Life present Oriental and Occidental modes of thinking in a dialectical form which forces synthesis. Take his Skyscraper. Here is a 20th century American invention born of specific technological events and specific economic circumstances; symbolically, it represents the pinnacle of western scientific rationalism. So Coma designs a tower which looks like one monolithic column. Now, a column requires a double reading. As a phenomenon in the neoclassical vocabulary, it represents generations of man; aspirations to exert rational control over the vagaries of political anarchy and the elements. Yet (as Laugier has taught us) the column speaks also of nature, since its roots are in the form of a tree. To build his column-tower Coma uses building materials which intimate the natural, premodern world. Its piers are rough cut stone, "an archetype image expressing absolute reality, life, and holiness,"(3) one which embodies human and natural history with unimaginable permanence. Surrounding the stone slabs Coma places other various natural elements: Windows as blue as the sky, a tile floor as limpid as the aquamarine sea. Base and crest hold all together, glinting a mineral gold. Hence Coma fuses prehistoric materials with a uniquely modern building type and uses a column form to suggest both the rational and the transcendental. One could not imagine standing inside Coma's Skyscraper without feeling the synthesis of the cosmic and the rational, the earthy and the divine.

Similarly, in his House of Death and Life Coma tries to fuse the opposing forces of life and death by suggesting an Oriental acceptance of death's place in the natural cosmology. In western culture life is seen as a straight line and death, as its arbitrary endpoint, is a sabotage of our rationality... a breakdown in the human machine."(4) Here Coma suggests that life and death exist together on a wave-like curve. On the crest of the curve is a (solid, positive) house for the living; buried in this valley is their (empty, negative) tomb. People live in the house and are buried in the tomb: Hence, life imparts death. Yet the presence of the tomb not only provides fodder for nature's growth but also enriches the lives of the inhabitants of the house--"Have you ever walked into a cemetery," asks Coma, "and walked out feeling that life is more special, more precious?" So, death also imparts life.

The form of the house itself is a metaphor for the project's fusion of opposing forms of consciousness. The cube-like house in western-rational, geometric, solid, closed, static. Its spindly roof and porch are Oriental: Its wood breathes and dies in rhythms nature has determined, its form is open and mortal, asymmetrical and fluid.

In these two projects Coma tries to synthesize western and Oriental consciousness through a dialectical fusion of symbolic forms. Yet in

other projects he approaches the same forces as if they were by their very essence opposed, implying that balance is the closest one can -or would want to - come to fusion. In the House of the Gatehring, for example, opposing forces do not meet, be they shadow and light, evil and good, man and woman, or (by extension) rationality and passion. A maze leads to a central core, in which rests a chair in the plan of an hourglass. Two enter at opposing corners, dark at one end and light at the other. As the path of each progresses toward the center it approached the hue of its opposite, the dark getting lighter and the light getting darker. Finally in the center is the chair where the two meet. But they never join completely: They sit facing in opposite directions, the plane of the back of the chair ever between them.

Opposing forces fail to join in the Solitary House as well. But because this project opposes similar forces to those Coma joined in the Skyscraper, like urbanity and nature, one begins to suspect that Coma does not intermingle Occident and Orient here because he's not sure he wants to. Coma puts an opaque facade to face a city street, explaining that this is the facade for "the Extrovert": The western urban dweller who accepts an artificial community. Opposite the entrance facade is a wall of curving glass, which symbolizes Oriental fluidity, just as it did in the House of Death and Life. This rear facade opens onto a private yard, serving "the Introvert": The solitary nature lover who fits in to no community. Except at the corner of the front entrance, where natural light floods through the opaque facade, the houses' two polarities do not join, and the integrity of each is carefully preserved. As opposed to the person who stands in the Skyscraper or mid-slope on the hill of the House of Death and Life, the person who transverses the Solitary House experiences first extrovert, then introvert, first rational, then natural.

Coma's ambivalence becomes more apparent when one considers his presentation. He thinks in terms of vision, symbol, and archetype, but frequently fails to translate this into plan, program, and space. And he relies on words to fill the gap. In the Solitary House, interior spaces are arranged to accommodate the symbolic interpolation of solid and void and the curving back wall. As a result, on the second floor one confronts a bedroom and a bathroom off a small, tight hallway, and there seems to be no way to pass from one bedroom to the other without climbing another flight. On the upper floors Coma puts bedrooms, bathrooms and a studio with little attention to how houses are actually used, as if no other spaces were necessary. Hence one learns more about the project's meaning from Coma's pedantic explanations which surround the plan than one does from letting the eye wander through the building. Coma's lack of interest in communicating his ideas through the manipulation of space is even clearer in the urban home project, as he creates an oddly-shaped loft-like living room but still has to tell us with words, not plan, that it is an "unquiet" form.

Coma would explain his method of presentation as follows. First, he lacks confidence in his image-making. This is understandable enough, since what he is attempting is not only difficult but unusual; contemporary American architecture affords little room for the communication of such issues. Second, planning bores him--it is a rational in the extreme; it is (as he puts it) the "bookkeeping" of architecture.

But if Coma devoted more time to the tectonics of architecture his audience would be freed to notice the things about a building which one responds to at a gut, irrational--spiritual, if you will--level: Things like enclosure and void, like light, color, and path. And the words which Coma believes elucidate his message in fact undermine it. For in explaining so much, Coma is grasping to retain control over his images. He refuses to release them into our imagination. The result is that he appeals with his intellect to our intellect to convince us of the limits of rationality and control--at best, an unintended irony; at worst, a subconscious attempt to subvert his own cause.

There is the issue of how architecture helps at all in an attempt to reconnect to the natural world. Doesn't the very act of putting up a building, which protects one from rain, wind, and winter, arises from the human need to separate from and exert control over the natural world? In other words, isn't the need to make architecture a fundamentally "Occidental" one? I don't know if Coma is thinking about this--I suspect he is--but the problem is indeed perplexing enough to be cause for some ambivalence.

Another explanation is that Coma partly believe, as have many anti-modernists before him, that as much as he hates his modernity he needs it, for the tension it creates makes his art. In short, part of him wants to maintain the integrity of the Occident, and fears the implications of merging passion and intellect.

As to the reasons for Coma's ambivalence which is betrayed not only by his presentation but also by his inconsistent fusion of symbologies, there are several explanations. Many opposites are at work here: light, dark: woman, man; country, city; nature, technology. One might think that the contradictions in Coma's vision regarding the possibility of their fusion arises because he discriminates between these pairs, thinking that some are forever opposed while others need not be. But all these pairs are merely symbols to describe his larger aim, the fusion of transcendental and rational consciousness; hence, other explanations must be sought.

